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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S MALAY MUSLIMS: SOCIAL PROBLEMS PERSIST
DESPITE EDUCATIONAL GAINS

REF: 04 SINGAPORE 1816

¶1. (U) Singapore's Malay Muslims have undergone a "dramatic transformation" in the last twenty-five years, asserted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in a September 2 speech. But he also called on the community to "muster a major effort" to address the needs of dysfunctional families. He emphasized that action must come from within the community and urged the historically competitive Malay Muslim self-help organizations to work together to complement each other's efforts.

¶2. (U) Two days later, the GOS released a report showing that Malay Muslims have made enormous strides since 1982 in educational levels. Thirty-four percent of Malay Muslims now receive some sort of tertiary education, up from only 1.3 percent in 1982. However, other negative social indicators continue to climb, including the divorce rate, the number of single parent homes, and the number of unwed mothers. Even where Malay Muslims have shown gains, their ethnic Chinese and Indian counterparts in Singapore have progressed just as quickly, so a gap remains.

¶3. (SBU) The local press has run a series of articles and editorials supporting PM Lee's points by quoting Malay Muslim community leaders. The community leaders point to the educational gains, while recognizing the need for more improvement in this area, and call for culturally sensitive, community-based measures to help dysfunctional families. Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim says he will undertake a review of existing community programs to see where more help is needed.

¶4. (SBU) Other Malay Muslim community leaders see the speech and report as just more rhetoric. The chairman of the Association of Muslim Professionals (which has been mildly critical of the GOS) criticized the speech for not breaking any new ground. A former policy analyst for another group told us she quit in July because she was disheartened by the community's lack of progress outside of education despite all the efforts by the self-help organizations.

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